

# DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL APATHY IN NIGERIA (1999-2011)

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## Abstract

This article is an examination of democracy and political apathy in Nigeria between 1999 and 2011. It attempted to find out the dangers of political apathy in Nigeria's democracy during the period under study. The article observed that political apathy manifested itself in the country between 1999 and 2011 in the following forms: one, the decline to register; two, the refusal to vote; three, failure to protest against rigging and four, failure to assist the security agents with useful information. It discovered that bad governance was responsible for political apathy. The article therefore recommended good governance as a solution to political apathy in Nigeria's democracy.

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**Keywords:** Democracy, political apathy, accountability, responsiveness, bad governance, national development, civic participation

## Introduction

Democracy today is widely believed to be the best form of government. It is considered as a prerequisite for national development because of the belief that it fosters transparency, accountability, the rule of law, respect for human rights and civic participation. All these are necessary for national development. But the successes of all these depend on the relationship between government and its people. Both the government and the people must meet up their expectations. The failures of government to meet up its expectations normally lead to political apathy. This article is an examination of democracy and political apathy in Nigeria between 1999 and 2011. Its main objective is to find out the dangers of political apathy in Nigeria's democracy. Its main proposition is that bad governance was responsible for apathy in Nigeria's democracy from 1999 to 2011.

This article is organized into five sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two gives conceptual clarifications on democracy and political apathy. Section three

discusses political apathy in Nigeria's democracy. Section four examines the dangers of political apathy in Nigeria's democracy. Section five is the conclusion.

### **Democracy And Political Apathy: Conceptual Clarifications**

Democracy is popularly conceived as government of the people, for the people and by the people (see Hassan, 2003:31). According to Mikailu and Yaqub (Mikailu and Yaqub, 2003), "Democratic politics is always everywhere built on certain minimum principles. These principles include participation and inclusiveness, responsiveness and accountability, transparency and good governance, regular, free and fair elections, freedom and respect for human rights and the observance of rule of law. Where these principles are in general observed, one can pronounce a government constituted in such a polity as democratic. Thus, from the above, one can see that a democratic government ensures participation and inclusiveness and is also responsive and accountable to its people. Otherwise, there will be apathy in the political system.

What then is political apathy? For the purpose of this article, political apathy is the deficiency of love and devotion to a state. It is the indifference on the part of citizens of any state as regards their attitudes towards political activities such as elections, public opinions, and civic responsibilities. Political apathy is therefore absence of interest in, or concern about, socio-political life. Thus, an apathetic person lacks interest in the social and political affairs of his country.

### **Political Apathy In Nigeria's Democracy**

The relationship between the Nigerian government and the people between 1999 and 2011 is a continuation of what started at independence in 1960. It was based on the understanding that the government would provide security, justice liberty and welfare for the people. On the other hand, people would be obedient and discharge their political, economic, social and other responsibilities.

Security to start with, simply denotes "freedom from danger or relative freedom from aggression and unwarranted violation" (Alkali, 1996:126). Along this line, as such, it is often perceived that the amount of security a state enjoys is just a mere reflection of its defense system (Alkali, 1996:126). Therefore, the threat of invasion or actual invasion of a territory by hostile forces is regarded as a threat to the security of that entity. However, security is more encompassing than what the definition suggests.

In its broader perspective, security can be classified into two. These are internal and external. Internal security has to do with the protection or safeguarding the lives, properties, rights, welfare and dignity of the citizens internally. While external security has to do with the protection of citizens' lives, properties, rights, welfare and dignity against external attack. It is for the purpose of both internal and external security that Nigeria has police, army, courts, prisons, customs, immigration, National Drugs Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), and State Security Services (SSS).

Provision of security is a core objective of every state. According to Plato, one of the most critical functions of the state is the protection of the society (see Nnoli, 1986:22; and Yakubu, 2009). Security as an objective or obligation of a state is more, and widely, discussed by social contract theorists such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. These theorists put more emphasis on human nature as the starting point for the formation of the state. According to them, before the establishment of a state, human beings lived in a state of nature. And it was in the attempt to escape from the state of nature that human beings decided to establish a state. As a result, a contract was made between the people and the state. The people were to obey and support the state while the state was to, among other things, protect the citizens against the danger in a state of nature in which life was very dangerous (Nnoli, 1986:24).

Machiavelli saw human nature as essentially selfish, and that the motives on which a statesman must had to rely were egoistic. Masses desired for security while the rulers desired power. Human nature was highly aggressive which resulted men into a condition of strife and competition. This was a serious threat that could cause anarchy unless restrained by a collective force. Thus, the state and the force behind it were the main power that could hold society together (Nnoli, 1986:24).

Just like Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes also saw the state of nature as an unpleasant one because individuals were mainly concerned with their own selfish interests. Moreover, people lived in a state of anarchy- a state of lawlessness, in constant fear of death because the strong could easily overpower and kill the weak for selfish interests. As such, man's life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (Nnoli, 1986:24). Thus, in this state of nature, there was neither right, nor wrong, justice or injustice. But as a result of the contract, the ability of the state to offer protection to the society was "its sole justification" (Nnoli, 1986:24). For any reason, "the state could no longer guarantee security and prosperity then it lost its justification for existence" (Nnoli, 1986:25).

Unlike Thomas Hobbes, John Locke saw the state of nature as one of “peace, goodwill, mutual assistance and preservation” (Nnoli, 1986:25). It was a state where by human beings possessed natural rights such as the right to life, liberty and property. In this state, any shortcoming was due to the absence of an organization that would be able to protect these rights. Therefore, the state came into being as a result of the contract of individuals in the state of nature with the sole purpose of protecting the individual’s natural right. An ideal state as such is one capable of, and in reality, protecting life, liberty and private property.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, just like Locke, was also of the idea that an ideal state is one which protects “with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as ever” (Nnoli, 1986:25). But a question of interest here is that, what is the position of Nigeria in relation to above? For a broader assessment, let us talk about political security, economic security, military security, socio-cultural security, and religious security in Nigeria.

Political security, internally, has to do with the provision of a political atmosphere which is conducive and free from any threat to individuals’ participation in the states’ political activities. This is necessary for the purpose of good governance. Political security is virtually absent in a situation whereby a state imposes its will on the people without their consent, or even consulting them. This used to be the practice in Nigeria. And it has already reached the extent to which people popularly vote a candidate into power but the state rigs, or supports a party to rig, or even cancels the election against the individual and the wish of the majority. Sometimes, some popular candidates are kidnapped or detained. They are released only when the elections are over. In some situations, some candidates are even assassinated. Political assassination, thuggery and assault are just common in Nigeria. Externally, time without number, a neighboring state may attack and kill or wound individuals, seize or destroy their properties without Nigeria doing adequately to protect them. These were experienced in Nigeria’s boarder conflicts particularly with Cameroon (Yakubu, 2001).

Economic security has to do with the protection of individuals against unemployment, inflation, hunger and starvation. It also has to do with the protection of their private property and general economic welfare. This is why it is necessary for a state to relate with other states in terms of trade (international trade); investment (foreign investment); and finance (international, monetary relations). But unfortunately, in Nigeria, those who have the

responsibility of managing the affairs of the state turned to constitute the greatest danger to its economic security by satisfying their selfish interests at the detriment of the state.

Military security has to do with the protection of lives and properties of individuals by the state against both internal and external aggression. This involves the direct use of force. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, forces are used against the majority of the citizens in favour of the interest of those few that manage the affairs of the state. This was evident in the killings and threatening the lives of innocent souls especially during and after the 2011 Presidential Elections.

Socio-cultural and religious security, put together, have to do with securing the cultural and religious norms and values of the society by the state. The state should preserve and protect these norms and values against internal and external degradation. Unfortunately, here also, those that manage the affairs of Nigeria, or some part of it, sometimes favour the culture and religion of a particular segment of the society at the detriment of the rest. This is known as favouritism.

Justice is the second objective, and another core obligation, of the state. Before the law, all citizens are equal and therefore should be treated equally. In the philosophy of St. Augustine and some other religiously minded people, “the state is a moral community, a group of persons who are governed under the same laws” (Nnoli, 1986:23). And it was highly maintained that, “Unless the state is a community existing for ethical purposes and holding together by moral ties, it is nothing more than a highway robbery on a large scale.” (Nnoli, 1986:23) Therefore, the state exists to supply the society with the advantages of mutual aid and just government. For Plato, the state is an embodiment of justice.

The need for justice to be provided by the state also explained why we have laws, lawmakers and executive, courts, judges, prisons, warders, and police in every state. In addition, this is the reason why we have the rule of law in the state which has three principles namely, supremacy of the law, equality before the law where all men are equal before the law; and fundamental human rights. However, in Nigeria, the privileged few constituting the wealthy, the powerful and influential are exceptional. They used to have the upper hand. In many cases, they prove to be above the law, unequal and enjoy more freedom.

Liberty is the third objective, and indeed, another obligation of the state. Liberty has to do with peoples’ freedom or rights. Rousseau was of the opinion that “the rights and liberties of individuals have no existence at all except in as much as individuals are members of a group”. In fact, in the theory of social contract, it was implied that the state must

guarantee citizens of certain rights. These rights are normally divided into the fundamental human rights and other rights (Ujo, 1996:68).

The fundamental human rights are regarded as inalienable rights which citizens can not be denied or taken away from them unless under specific circumstances. These rights include the right of life; right to dignity of human person, right to personal liberty, right to fair hearing, right to private and family life, right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and right to freedom of expression.

Right of life connotes that every person has a right to life which no one should be deprived of it intentionally except in the execution of the sentence of a court in respect of a criminal offence punishable by death and of which he has been found guilty.

Right to dignity of human person implies that every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person. So no individual should be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment. No individual should be held in slavery or servitude, or even required to perform forced or compulsory labour.

Right to personal liberty means that every individual is entitled to his personal liberty and that no one should be deprived of such right if not under certain legal conditions.

Right to fair hearing means that every person is entitled to a fair hearing within reasonable time by a court or other tribunal established by law. This is in the determination of the individual civil rights and obligations including any question or determination by or against any government or authority.

Right to private and family life emphasizes “the privacy of citizens, their homes, correspondence, telephone conversations and telegraphic communication being guaranteed and protected” by the state.

Right to freedom of thought conscience and religion means that every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This includes the freedom to change one’s religion or belief, and the freedom to manifest and propagate one’s religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

Right to freedom of expression means that every individual is entitled to freedom of expression, including the freedom to hold opinions, to receive and impart ideas and information free from any interference.

Apart from the fundamental human rights, other rights are categorized into social rights, economic rights, and political rights. The social rights include free education at all levels, health services for all, and shelter for all. The economic rights include employment for

all, provision of infrastructural services, and cheap and effective transport system. The political rights include political education to all, and the right to participate in politics, that is to say, the right to vote and be voted for.

However, just like on the issues of security and justice, whether Nigeria is providing and protecting the rights and liberties of all individuals is something else. Fairly, we can see their entrenchment in the 1999 and even the previous constitutions of the country. We can also see the presence of the armed forces meant to protect the citizens' rights against external infringement in Nigeria. Likewise, police and other security forces exist and are expected to do the same within the state. Courts also exist with the aim of deciding when such rights are infringed. And prisons also exist for the purpose of detaining for a period of time those found of any crime. But in many circumstances, the fundamental human rights and other rights are mere provisions in the constitution of Nigeria. This is because rule of law is not strictly adhered to. Therefore, as pointed out earlier, instead of having the law as supreme, you have some individuals above the law; and instead of having fundamental human rights and other rights for all individuals, you have the fundamental human rights and other rights of the privileged few by virtue of their wealth, power or influence being observed by Nigeria. There have been several complaints of marginalization leading to a number of crises.

Welfare is the fourth objective, and last even though not the least obligation expected of Nigeria since a state exists for the purpose of protecting life. Good life is just necessary because without it, social living would not have much meaning and purpose.

Central to good life is the welfare to be provided by Nigeria. This could be provided through economic, political and social development. In order to achieve this, Nigeria must tackle unemployment, poverty and inequality, or the widening gap between the rich and the poor. It is its duty to provide infrastructural facilities such as roads, hospitals, schools, portable drinking water, recreational centres and facilities, just to mention but few. Not only that, for proper welfare or good life, Nigeria must encourage its unity, strength and self reliance.

However, as to whether Nigeria achieves welfare objective, or fulfills the provision of welfare as an obligation, it is also in question. This is because development used to be much more concentrated in the urban areas. There are so many rural areas in Nigeria that up to date do not know that the state exists in terms of welfare or good life. Most of them, being peasant farmers, could not even have access to modern fertilizer. They were already brainwashed to discard the local fertilizer on the ground that the modern one is more effective.

Nigeria's economy is agrarian with over half of the population engaged in farming using crude farm implements and outdated methods of farming thereby making the country unable to produce even its food requirements. The economy is dominated by the export of crude oil and characterized by weak productive base with declining growth rate. It has low level of industrialization and capacity utilization. It is bedeviled by heavy internal and external debts. The government withdrawn all subsidies including on agriculture, education and petroleum. The infrastructure has not only decayed but is on the verge of collapse. The rates of unemployment and inflation are too high. Indeed, Nigeria's economy is poverty-ridden with very poor citizens as reflected in their living conditions.

The four objectives or obligations expected of Nigeria to its society namely, security, justice, liberty and welfare are strongly related or even interdependent. Unfortunately, Nigeria has demonstrated to be very weak and one sided in favour of the privileged few. In fact, the major shortcomings of Nigeria justifies the Marxist perception of a state as an organ of class rule, an organ of the oppression of one class by another (Nnoli, 1986:28).

Citizens and their obligations to the state is the other most significant aspect of the relationship between the state and the society. In the social contract that was entered between the people and the state, it was not only the state that was to carry out certain functions or fulfills certain obligations but also the people were expected to do certain things. The obligations or duties that the people or citizens were expected to carry out could be broadly categorized into political, military, economic, socio-cultural and religious.

Political obligations of the citizens to the state include paying allegiance to the state, obedience to the laws of the state and voting during elections. In fact, the first duty of citizens is to be loyal to the state. And this of course involves the respect for the National Flag, National Pledge and Anthem and all National Institutions. Not only that, as the state is regulated by various laws made to maintain peace and order, all citizens must therefore obey the laws. Although this is what ought to be, however, we have so many political deviants who disobey laws, refuse to be loyal to the state, and also fail to vote at elections. These practices are rampant in Nigeria mostly due to the fact that the citizens have lost confidence on the state following its incompetence in its obligations. Moreover, they have experienced severally that the votes they cast do not matter in producing a government or an elected officer due to elections malpractices either planned or supported by government or its officials.



Military obligations imply the duty of the citizens to fight or supply relevant information for defence of the state when the need arose. That is to say, the citizens are duty bound to defend the state when it is threatened by an external enemy. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, not only that some citizens are not willing to defend or supply information for the state against an enemy, but they are willing and ready to contribute towards its disintegration. This contributes to the high level of insecurity currently on the ground.

Economic obligations include payment of taxes to the state and contributing positively towards its economic development through productive exercises. All citizens are expected to pay their tax. This is because taxes or levies are used to run the various services that the state provides. And without the payment of these tax or levies, the state may not be able to meet its obligations. Unfortunately, some individuals in Nigeria do not pay their taxes. Their reason is that, not everything they pay reaches the government due to the bad habits of many tax collectors. This contributes in retarding national development.

Socio-cultural and religious obligations, put together, imply the expectations by the state from its citizens to contribute positively towards the preservation and protection of the state's socio-cultural beliefs, norms, values and religious tolerance in order to help preserve the corporate existence of the state. Prayers are also expected as they are essential for the survival and progress of the state. But unfortunately some citizens disregard the beliefs, norms and values of Nigeria and even buy the idea of, or support, religious intolerance which to a greater extent threatens the security of the state.

From the foregone discussions, we have already seen that citizens' obligations to the state are categorized into political, military, economic, socio-cultural and religious. These are also highly related or even interdependent. They are necessary for the survival and functioning of the state. But unfortunately, as already noted, some citizens in Nigeria are far from meeting these obligations due to laxity on the part of government.

### **Dangers Of Political Apathy In Nigeria's Democracy**

It is not healthy for any state to have only few people who are willing to participate in civic activities. In Nigeria, political apathy has manifested itself from 1999 to 2011 in a number of forms. These include refusal to register in voter's register; refusal to vote; refusal to protest against rigging; and refusal to assist the security agents with useful information.

Registration of voters is necessary before an election can take place. In Nigeria in 1999, the total population was put at 108,258,35 (see table below). Out of this, the actual number that registered was 57,938,945.

**Table: Nigerian Population, Registration And Voters Turn Out From 1999 To 2011**

Year	Voter Turn out	Total Vote	Registration	VAP Turnout	Voting Age Population (VAP)	Invalid Votes	Population
2011	53.68%	39,469,484	73,528,040	48.32%	81,691,751	3.19%	155,215,57
2007	58%	*	61,567,036	*	71,004,507	*	131,859,73
2003	69.08%	42,018,735	60,823,022	65,33%	64,319,246	6%	129,934,91
1999	52.26%	30,280,052	57,938,945	57.36%	52,792,781	1.4%	108,258,35

No official figures for indicators marked \* was given on the table

Source: Collated from INEC Headquarters (2011).

As at 2003, the table above indicates that Nigeria's population has increased to 129,934,91. But the number of people that registered was 60,823,022.

In 2007, Nigeria's population was 131,859,73. Out of this, only 61,567,036 registered as the table shows.

By 2011, the table indicates that Nigeria's population was 155,215,57. The voting age population (VAP) was 81,691,751. However only 73,528,040 registered.

Registration is one thing, while voting is another thing. Many people registered from 1999 to 2011 as shown in the table but did not vote. Out of the 57,938,945 that registered in 1999, only 30,280,052 voted.

In 2003, out of the 60,823,022 that registered, only 42,018,735 cast their votes. In 2007, out of the 61,567,036 that registered, only 58% voted. In 2011, out of the 73,528,040 that registered, only 39,469,484 cast their votes.

Even for the number of people that voted, their votes did not count in many parts of the country due to rigging. Rigging of elections is very dangerous for any democracy. This is because it allows unpopular, dictatorial, unrepresentative and irresponsible leaders to emerge. It retards national development, people therefore must protest against rigging; their refusal is a form of political apathy. In Nigeria, elections were believed to have been rigged. Yet, there has never been a massive protest against rigging except in 2011. Even the 2011 protest was not seriously considered as a massive protest because it was limited to only some states in the North.

Given the prevailing security problem in the country, Nigerians are supposed to assist the security agents with useful information. Some information especially related to crimes is

necessary for orderliness or even for the survival of the state. Many Nigerians today are not willing to share such information with the security agents.

### **Conclusion**

This article has attempted to examine democracy and political apathy in Nigeria between 1999 and 2011. It found out that democracy can only be the best form of government if its principles are adhered to. But if the principles are not adhered to, the situation could lead to political apathy due to bad governance. The article discovered that bad governance is manifested in rulers who are not truly representatives of, and responsive to, the peoples interests. Bad governance makes people less concerned about their political affairs. This was demonstrated in the declining interests of Nigerians to register and vote from 1999 to 2011 as indicated in the table. This article therefore suggests that, for the purpose of peace, unity, security and development, the Nigerian government must understand that it is duty bound to fulfill its expectations efficiently. When this is done, the citizens will also be made to discharge their responsibilities to overcome the dangers of political apathy.

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